

Poetically Correct

Tamás Bényei, *Az ártatlan ország: Az angol regény 1945 után* [The Innocent Country: The English Novel after 1945] (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2003)

Possibly his best, Tamás Bényei's fifth book is certainly his biggest contribution to the study of British fiction. It is one huge book.¹ Not quite as huge as that "Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire," it is big enough to make the title of its own ninth chapter, "A méretek poétikája," or The Poetics of Size, look curiously self-referential. The awe struck by the sheer proportions of *Az ártatlan ország* in the heart of this reviewer and others of his profession on first contemplating this 540-page tome must have been anticipated by the author himself. In any case, Tamás Bényei felt obliged to offer his apologies for the sheer physical dimensions of this massive volume. While his admission of suffering from some temperamental verbosity is as groundless as it is facetiously self-deprecating – Bényei's style is anything but garrulous – Bényei's caveats about the writer's "critical nominalism" and his "doubts about the potentials . . . of literary history" are to be taken seriously (10).²

Bényei's qualms seem to concern his own reservations about the ultimate applicability of the most fundamental categories that he uses to give a coherent

account of his vast, and vastly complex, subject. How much is gained by pointing out the fact that most, if not all, of the novels of the period discussed display modernist, realist and postmodern features in a combination best conforming to the *telos* of the critical narrative applied? And indeed, to what extent are we justified in assuming that our categories do in fact exist, that postmodernism, realism and modernism are entities with unshakeable ontological foundations – that these terms describe things "out there" (10–11)? But then, such nomenclature is very hard to dispense with. Uncertain as their referents are, arbitrary as their application invariably proves to be, these terms have a heuristic value one could hardly do without. And if the job of charting out a territory as treacherous as that of post-war English fiction is to be done, if our map is to be a map and not a whole empire, then we had better suspend our disbelief and pretend that verbal categories have a rock-solid existence, and that beginnings, ends and boundaries are more than convenient (or inconvenient) inventions. Fictional, historical or critical, grand or little, narratives must eventually conform to certain conventions, conventions of emplotment, archaeology and teleology.

What, then, are the boundaries of Bényei's inquiries? Where does he begin, in what direction does he proceed, and how does he propose to get there? The reader is not left in any unnecessary sus-

pense before these perfectly legitimate questions are answered. The "Introduction" clearly identifies the precise subject matter and states the major critical aims of the author's scholarly enterprise in due course. Bounded by 1945, the year marking the end of wartime carnage and deprivation, at one end, and then the emergence of postmodernism "proper" with the attendant critical discourses at the other, the period surveyed comprises the later nineteen-forties through the late-seventies and some of the eighties, with the two middle decades, the fifties and sixties, receiving the author's most concentrated attention. The novelists whose works are thus submitted to rigorous, but at the same time sympathetic, reading include all the major, and some of the minor, writers of the highlighted era from Angus Wilson and George Orwell to Kingsley Amis, William Golding, Iris Murdoch and Anthony Burgess, to name but a handful of those whose works receive chapter-length treatment, leaving unmentioned many of the "leading," and all of the "episodic," characters in Bényei's embracing narrative.

As for its thematic aspirations, *Az ártatlan ország* undertakes to accomplish something far more liberating than may be suggested by the unpleasant connotations of surreptitious subjection and disempowerment through mechanical linearity and rigid structural hierarchy that the term "narrative" has recently acquired. In the first major section of the book, it is documented how the debilitat-

ing discourses and practices dominating the critical reception of the post-war novel in England have led to the academic marginalisation, or "undercanonisation," of a whole range of exciting texts in the country where they were written and, with the possible exception of the United States, in most other countries, including Hungary, too. Bényei's main culprit is the rigid representational poetic of the Leavis-school predicated on an essentialist ideology of Englishness and grounded in a liberal humanism badly outdated already in the heyday of the powerful cultural politics it supported. Contending critical narratives of a more permissive type – the newer canons constructed by Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge in their respective histories of the contemporary English novel – did little to do justice to whatever failed to conform to their apparently more receptive and up-to-date, but in reality equally convention-ridden and pro-humanist, criteria of novelistic excellence. Where F. R. Leavis and his followers had rejected out of hand all that they found alien and not assimilable into their "Great Tradition" of the English novel, the two younger critics – Bradbury in particular – desperately tried to naturalise the foreign, domesticate the *unheimlich*, and tame the untameable.

Taking their cue from various posthumanist theories ranging from deconstruction to cultural materialism and the New Historicism, Bényei's English (near-)contemporaries and the generation of North-

Americans immediately preceding his own have certainly done much to improve the situation. Due to the occasional aesthetic blindness caused by the canon-busting zeal of this newest criticism, there is nevertheless much left to be done (or undone) by Béneyei himself, and, as he repeatedly suggests, his students and colleagues. This, of course, is not to say that Béneyei is unaware of how much valuable work has been done by those who have gone before him. As every other page of *Az ártatlan ország* bears witness, we have very much to thank the North Americans – Robert Scholes, Andreas Huyssen and Lynda Hutcheon come most readily to mind – for enabling us to discover the postmodern tendencies of generic blending, metafictionality, pastiche, metalepsis, and apocryphal historiography in the novels of fifties and sixties writers who had precious little to do with what goes by the name “English postmodernism.” Of no less importance is the insight provided by such contemporary British scholars as Steven Connor, whose innovative terminology – particularly his remarks on the “structures of addressivity” in various novels Béneyei examines in *Az ártatlan ország* – has done much to help the Hungarian scholar to elucidate the nature of the “linguistic turn” observable in, say, the later works of Kingsley Amis or William Golding.³ Connor’s case is of particular interest in another respect, too. Despite being one of the critics most frequently cited in support of the various points made in *Az ártatlan*

ország – it is Connor’s healthy disregard for all forms of canonicity in particular that makes Béneyei welcome a kindred spirit in the Englishman – not even the author’s favourite is exempt from censure when it comes to matters of principle or issues of preference. That is why Béneyei will not let it pass when Connor fails to recognize anything beyond a nostalgic yearning for some Victorian stability in what the English critic perceives to be a return to nineteenth-century habits of reading supposedly promoted by the novel-sequences of the postwar period (294–95). This, of course, does not prevent Béneyei from recognizing, and drawing meticulously documented inspiration from, Steven Connor’s *The English Novel in History*.

Excellent as Connor’s book may be in general, its author is not yet a member of our international pantheon of literary and critical celebrities. However, Béneyei is not the kind of critic who would stand dumbstruck in the presence of global fame, either. No person or cause, however venerable, is safe from his book’s uncompromising metacritical consistency. That “habitually accurate scholar,” Frank Kermode is caught at getting the names of characters wrong when it comes, rather symptomatically, to Alan Sillitoe, a “mere” working-class novelist (245). To be sure, star critics to the left of Kermode’s updated humanism are also reminded of their blind spots. Alan Sinfield’s historical account in which the modernist “detour” was no more than a

“bourgeois mock-rebellion against the bourgeoisie” carries little enough conviction for Béneyei. The post-Marxian critic, we are told, rather badly underrated the resilience of conservative traditions that modernist writers in England were up against throughout the fifties and the early sixties (205). Similarly, the contrast set up and carried through in Evelyn Waugh’s postwar novels between the refined sensibilities of a civilized past and the hopeless vulgarity of a dreary present is demonstrated to be badly misread by no lesser an authority on the English novel than Terry Eagleton. Béneyei does not mince his words: the equation, made in *Exiles and Emigrés*, of Waugh’s complex opposition with a case of naked class antagonism is a clear instance of reductively ideological misrepresentation (342). More insidious than the occasional slip of a highly regarded left-wing critic is a general tendency of aesthetic conservatism, noted by Béneyei, in oppositional literature and, by extension, oppositional criticism. The practitioners of these discourses seem to valorise the realist novel at the expense of more innovative modes of narrative fiction (241). The resulting pressure towards a “responsible” documentary approach goes a long way to explain why feminist criticism has consistently ignored some of the most exciting experimental works of women-writers (65n8). In particular, the failure of Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch to embrace the agenda of women’s liberation must have caused

their being overlooked by most leading feminist literary critics (374, 432n3).

This does not mean that the writer of *Az ártatlan ország* has any serious argument with political radicalism in general or critical feminism in particular. On the contrary, although his literary judgments are informed by aesthetic considerations above all, Béneyei does have his political sympathies, which invariably lie with the marginalised and the disempowered. He spares no praise when he comes across a novel whose oppositional “message” is successfully expressed by means of advanced novelistic methods. Such is the case with Sillitoe’s “best novel” (246), *The Key to the Door*, where radical politics prove, in Béneyei’s analysis, to be combined with an innovative poetic of fiction, resulting in “an ‘experimental’ novel,” one of the clearest examples in its period of a narrative text organised along modernist principles *and* written by a working-class novelist (247). Similarly, “one of [Muriel Spark’s] best novels,” *The Driver’s Seat*, is an experimental *tour de force* that could also lend itself to a political, in this case feminist, reading.⁴

A related aspect of *Az ártatlan ország* is its strategy of trying to secure a higher position in the changing literary canon for some well-known novelists whose newly acquired reputation as aesthetic or political conservatives has rendered their work suspect in the eye of current theory and criticism. Graham Greene and Anthony Burgess are two cases in point,

whose novels should be submitted, as Bényei convincingly argues, to a post-colonial reading informed by insight derived from the works of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhaba (472–73). As exemplified by the author’s relevant observations, such a critical approach would be both feasible and profitable. That the typical setting of the Greene novel was transferred to the Third World after World War II is a clear indication of how Greeneland “discovered itself in these hybrid spaces of amalgamation, unformed shapes and impending danger” (358). The protagonist of Burgess’s “Malayan Trilogy” is destroyed by his own misguided liberal humanism in which naïve essentialism blends with Western-style scientific arrogance to form a textbook case of Orientalism diagnosed in Said’s analysis of the same title. At the same time, the antics of assimilation performed by the various grotesque figures of all complexions peopling Burgess’s East remind the informed reader of Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as expounded in *The Location of Culture* (472–73). No doubt, a thorough investigation of the postcolonial implications inscribed in these two novelists’ respective works could do much to improve the current canonical status enjoyed by Greene and Burgess as well as provide new evidence of the vitality that postcolonial studies could have even outside their customary areas of application.

Important as Bényei’s suggestions are as to what research should be undertaken

by others, the interpretative-evaluative work done by the author himself is, after all, what makes *Az ártatlan ország* into what one should not hesitate to call a masterpiece of literary criticism. There is no exaggeration in the claim that each and every one of Bényei’s analyses is a classic example of how close textual reading can fruitfully interact with literary history and theory. Choosing one or another of these virtuoso chapter-essays is thus a very arbitrary affair: Bényei’s book provides the best possible illustration of what is meant by “the distress of plenty.” But as choose one must, it is best to admit that one’s choice can be motivated by hardly more than a random set of personal preferences. Thus Bényei’s discussion of the role played by certain archetypal motifs in turning Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* into an ironic combination of Bildungsroman and “novel of nostalgia,” his sympathetic rereading of Kingsley Amis’s later works as documents of their writer’s darkening linguistic humour reminiscent of Beckett’s absurdist comedy, or the discovery of the linguistic instability that subverts the genre “educational novel” in Golding’s sea trilogy, could perhaps be highlighted as the crown-jewels in the treasury called *Az ártatlan ország*.⁵

Most importantly perhaps, the key to the door of that treasure-house of academic knowledge can be turned with surprisingly little effort by any of Bényei’s compatriots, even if their mastery of Eng-

lish is far less impressive than that of the author. Although its very title comes from an English-language study of the English novel, *Az ártatlan ország* is written in its entirety in Tamás Bényei's native Hungarian. To this reader of his work, the finest proof of Bényei's democratic ideals referred to above is to be located in his choice of idiom, an idiom which is not simply Hungarian, but educated layman's Hungarian. For Bényei, words like "dichotomy," "intertextuality," and "defamiliarisation" are not what most of his Hungarian colleagues would blithely translate, or transliterate, as *dichotómia*, *intertextualitás*, and *defamiliarizáció*. Bényei's Hungarian equivalents are the hard-to-invent-easy-to-understand terms of *kétosztatúság*, *szövegköziség* and *elkülönösítő eljárás*. The writer of *Az ártatlan ország* is happy to leave the job of making the reader feel uneasy, or *unheimlich*, to his favourite novelists. Being a born teacher as much as a true scholar, Bényei cannot help helping. For that alone, *Az ártatlan ország* should have a place of honour on every Hungarian's bookshelf who still cares about such old-fashioned things as books and literature, or books on literature. It is another matter that this great book would deserve an even larger readership. His reviewer looks forward to introducing another major work of Tamás Bényei's, a comprehensive study of the postwar English novel to be called *The Innocent Country*.

Ákos I. Farkas

Notes

1. The term "innocent country," whose Hungarian translation serves as the title of Bényei's book, comes from Bernard Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel*, as revealed by Bényei himself (146).

2. All translations from Bényei's Hungarian original are mine.

3. Misspelling Connor's first name as Stephen in the list of works cited is one of the few lapses of attention that the meanest reader will find in the 240,000-word corpus of the book (511). Others include the co-opting of Harold Macmillan into the Labour Party (22), the renaming of a painting by Nicolas Poussin (*Balla della vita humana* instead of *Il Ballo della Vita Humana* [306]), and the absence from the bibliography of some major philosophers cited by Bényei (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu and György Lukács). This reviewer hopes to have made no more mistakes than that in his present survey, a mere snippet of a text by comparison.

4. That Muriel Spark has been ignored by feminist scholarship is all the more surprising as her *Miss Jean Brody* is, among other things, "a rereading of *Jane Eyre*," much like Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*, which has a pre-eminent position in the feminist canon (374). Bényei obliges with an exhaustive-looking list of *Jane Eyre* variations written after 1945 (128n11), which will be found particularly helpful by prospective thesis-writers. Similar lists help those with an interest in such "genres" as the "war novel" (137n3), the "working-class novel" (240n15, 243n16), and recent versions of the "condition-of-England novel" (143n6).

5. Longer versions of Bényei's studies on Waugh and Golding can be read in English in his *Acts of Attention: Figure and Narrative in Postwar British Novels* (Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 15–64 and 93–169.